

Audio-visuals in Exhibitions

This chapter presents an overview of the various typologies of audio-visual texts used in museum exhibitions, preliminary to the analysis developed in the following chapters. I will focus on four main categories: archival footage (both ‘raw’ and manipulated), educational documentaries and specially designed montages, historical reconstructions (‘docufictions’), and video testimonies.

ARCHIVAL FOOTAGE

In the first part of this book, we have seen how the footage of the Imperial War Museum had to be transferred from film to cards in order to be shown in the Mutoscopes. In a way, contemporary museums go through a similar process: archival photo and video footage, mostly preserved on fragile film reels, are being digitised in order to be included in exhibitions. This covert operation has a number of implications in terms of how images can be used, shown, manipulated, and received.¹

One of the first consequences of the greater flexibility of digital photo and video footage is the wider visibility of archives *inside* the museum space: visitors enjoy direct access to a large quantity of images that document historical events and that are seamlessly placed alongside objects or artworks. Moving images and photographs are showcased as if they were concrete exhibits, as witnesses to the past: they seem able to preserve, despite the change of format, their ‘ontological’ capacity to carry the trace of reality and offer direct access to past events. According to a belief rooted in the origins of the medium, the photographic image creates a univocal relation between the sign and its referent: images are perceived as objective representations of the real world, and hence as an ideal tool of historical preservation. Exhibitions, however, are never neutral: to the contrary, they constitutively imply a selection of the exhibits (be they objects or archival footage), based on their consistency with the museum’s wider narrative.

In some cases, the exhibition is designed to problematise the items on display, revealing how images can convey a meaning that is different from what they apparently show. At the In Flanders Fields Museum in Ieper

(Belgium), devoted to the First World War on the Flanders Western Front, the visit begins with the projection of archival footage on irregular, large curved panels. The archival footage shows the euphoric atmosphere and imagery of the Belle Époque. And yet, the exhibition layout seems precisely to question the capacity of these images to actually capture the deep tensions that marked the period just before the start of the war: the surface on which they are projected is shattered, broken, as if to evoke the undercurrent angst and unease of the souls. The conflict, while still latent, is already present as a power that can cause deep cracks in the structure of reality. Rather than stopping at the immediate evidence, the display highlights what is concealed under the appearance of the images. In order to visit the rest of the exhibition, the viewer must go through, both literally and metaphorically, the surface of what is being shown. The archival footage of the Belle Époque is therefore treated as a mediated account of the past that tells us about the modes of self-representation of a given time rather than providing a supposedly objective description.

The second implication of the digitisation of archival footage concerns the possibilities of manipulation. While analogue photography and (later) video (but also Mutoscope cards) were not impossible to modify as such, their digital counterparts are so easily manipulated that they encourage a variety of options and combinations, often – and here is the most problematic point – in a covert way. This problematises the relationship between the archival images and the historical content they convey, emphasising the fact that they are never an objective and unmediated representation of the past.

The display of archival film footage can introduce a great degree of ambiguity between the (supposed) transparency of images and a high level of mediation in the construction of the museum discourse. A particularly representative case in this regard is the Churchill War Rooms in London, which uses a large amount of audio-visual footage and a large number of interactive devices. In this museum, films, photographs, text, graphics, and audio recordings have the same value as objects in the transmission of historical knowledge, and are combined to create a coherent narrative about Churchill's life. The exhibition is largely based on 4:3-ratio, black-and-white silent film footage, which has been digitised and is projected on screens and monitors of different sizes. As stressed by John Pickford, one of the exhibition's designers, this footage has undergone processes such as re-shaping, colorisation, and cropping. What is at stake here is thus not limited to the possible changes constitutively imposed by digitisation; designers moreover deliberately edited film footage to give it a new appearance and a new meaning. Furthermore, throughout the whole exhibition,

a visual language was developed that is recognisably mid-20th century in character, consciously evoking the period in which Churchill was alive . . . all screens were coordinated to have a mid-20th century, paper-heavy feel; a virtual analogue recalling a pre-digital age dominated by paperwork, filing cabinets, folders, maps, telephones and busy working desks – the stuff of Churchill's life. Content on the screen was treated as real; papers, photos held the attributes of the real thing.²

The 'visual style' applied to the whole display contributes to the distancing of the archival images from our time to underline the fact that they were filmed in the past. The exhibition exploits a vast range of digital and up-to-date technologies, but at the same time its visual style is arranged to seem as dated as possible, to fulfil visitors' expectations about the atmosphere of Churchill's age.

At the Historial Charles de Gaulle in Paris, based on multi-media and interactive devices, the archival footage composing the documentary on de Gaulle presented in the first exhibition room³ was reframed and retouched to emphasise the grain of the image in order to 'convey a certain emotion' and to 'sublimate' the effects of black-and-white pictures.⁴ Despite the digitisation of analogue images, the curators tried not to lose the characteristic patina of the pictures, but rather to emphasise it. Defining the patina, with the words of French semiologist Jacques Fontanille, as any time-induced and regular alteration of the surface of an object,⁵ it follows that the patina plays a dual role: it constitutes a manifestation of how 'transient time' and usage are inscribed on the external surface of the object, and it is also an expression of 'endurance through time', as testified by the solidity and durability of the object's material.⁶ The operation conducted on the archival footage at the Historial Charles de Gaulle therefore goes beyond a simple transposition from analogue to digital: it has a direct impact on the visibility of the traces of the past, through the double operation of cancelling the original patina and simulating a new one. The difference between past and present is blurred, if not cancelled, and their relationship becomes more ambiguous. In other words, what matters here is not the integrity and 'authenticity' of the images as much as the 'aged effect' that the images can produce, as well as their capacity to conjure up, in the words of Fredric Jameson, the 'pastness of the past'⁷ from a combination of expectations, beliefs, and tastes that are actually typically contemporary.

Both at the Churchill War Rooms and at the Historial Charles de Gaulle, the recreation of the tone and style of a historical period (revisited to make it more comprehensible to present visitors) proves to be as important as the information provided itself. To make this point is not to question the accuracy, richness, and completeness of the historical sources used by the museums; rather, I am claiming that the emphasis here is more on an overall

‘experience’ of the atmosphere of Churchill’s or de Gaulle’s era, as well as on the emotions engendered by objects and videos.

These examples suggest that the use of archival materials is not always a neutral process that presents history in its own integrity, but must be considered in relation to the museums’ more general exhibition strategies, and to the type of spectatorial response they aim to solicit.

DOCUMENTARIES

Documentaries are among the most widespread audio-visual documents shown in exhibitions.⁸ While museums may use existing documentaries, in many cases they commission or produce them specifically for the display.

One of the most common documentary formats used in museums involves a montage of archival footage accompanied by a voice-over providing textual historical narrative. The narrative often aims to provide a historical context in such a way as to be synthetic, effective, and ‘engaging’ – hence the use of audio-visuals, supposedly less demanding on the viewer’s attention span than lengthy introductory panels. Depending on their length and complexity, but also on the museum’s specific choices, documentaries can be shown directly in the museum’s galleries or in dedicated viewing spaces equipped with screens and seats.

The films often provide an important part of the information that the museum wishes to convey. For instance, the documentary *Timescapes* at the Museum of the City of New York shows in less than thirty minutes the history of the city from the first settlements to contemporary New York, with the help of archival documents and present-day video footage. The film is presented on three screens in a room on the second floor, minimally furnished with a few rows of seats placed in front of the projection surface. The focus is entirely on the film and there is nothing in the room to distract the viewer from the unfolding narrative. The montage exploits the three-screen structure of the projection surface by alternatively composing a single image or by juxtaposing different materials, such as maps, graphics, archival photographs, and videos that illustrate the story of the city. The large dimensions of the screens ensure the immersive character of the installation, so as to visually convey the metropolis’ gigantism. The voice-off narrative provides not only a wealth of information on the history of New York, but also a carefully designed interpretation that emphasises its exceptional growth since its beginnings as a small settlement. It also describes it as a modern, welcoming, and dynamic city, always ready to reinvent itself and to face new challenges.

In other cases, the montage can be more evocative. A case in point are the so-called ‘reflection spaces’ in the First World War Galleries of the Imperial

War Museum: branching from the main exhibition itinerary, these rooms allow the viewers to pause and collect their thoughts for a few minutes. Alongside a few objects, these reflection spaces showcase films where the montage of still and moving images is accompanied by extracts from the letters and personal diaries of soldiers, read aloud by a voice-off. Rather than providing a historical context, these spaces offer the opportunity to develop a personal reflection on war-related themes, as emerges from titles such as *Should Wars Have Rules?* or *Kill Or Be Killed?*

RECONSTRUCTIONS AND FICTIONAL FILMS

On-screen historical reconstructions are a typical feature of archaeology and history museums, especially if dedicated to historical periods that preceded the possibility of photographic or cinematic documentation. In these museums, the function of films is mostly educational, as they aim to 'bring back' the past in a fictional but scientifically accurate form. For instance, the Virtual Archaeological Museum Herculaneum (Museo archeologico virtuale di Ercolano) near the famous Italian archaeological site, features about seventy multi-media reconstructions of the everyday life of Herculaneum before the city was destroyed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. Reconstructions, however, are also used to present more recent events and aspects of collective or individual history, either because they were not directly captured by the camera, or because they need to be presented in a more engaging form.

Immersive and realistic on-screen reconstructions are reminiscent of other means of communication used by museums, such as theatre performances,⁹ or dioramas and life groups. The last form of display is a three-dimensional reconstruction of animal habitats or human scenes, often used in natural history or ethnographic museums.¹⁰ These illusionistic displays emerged in the nineteenth century as a result of the evolution of museums towards more educational purposes. On the one hand, they conveyed scientific information about the characteristics and living conditions of animals or human groups; on the other, they were highly spectacular and enticing to visitors. In a sense, moving images inherited that power: although dioramas were never completely dropped, Karen Wonders notes that they were frequently replaced by IMAX and OMNIMAX movie theatres or, more recently, by virtual reality (VR) experiments that take up and enhance the illusionistic experience.¹¹

Audio-visuals do not necessarily need to be realistic to deal with problematic events. The installation *Shock* in the First World War Galleries of the Imperial War Museum illustrates the devastating impact of the 75 mm

cannons that were used at the time. This computer animation shows a body of German and French soldiers advancing towards the weapon and falling under a shower of shrapnel balls before they are able to reach it. The violence of the scene, already stylised despite the realism of the movements shown in motion capture, is toned down even further by the irregular projection surface that follows the outlines of the soldiers, fragmenting the images. However, the sound of gunfire and the groans of wounded soldiers carry a strong emotional impact, emphasised by, and reflected in, the weapon's tangible presence.

The installation aims to communicate to visitors, less than the technical characteristics of the weapon, the effect of its use on human lives. The goal is first and foremost to provoke an unsettling emotional response, even if the content is made less direct and violent by the use of animations rather than realistic images.

VIDEO TESTIMONIES

As mentioned above, museum narratives often include video testimonies. This term was originally coined in order to define the audio-visual recordings collected from 1979 onwards by the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. The collection aimed to give Holocaust survivors the opportunity to tell their own version of the events, and to use these stories in educational products. This pioneering initiative was followed in 1994 by Steven Spielberg's decision to found the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, whose wide-scale collection programme has produced an archive containing more than 52,000 audio-visual testimonies.¹²

Thanks to these and other similar initiatives, video testimonies have gradually become institutionalised and are no longer limited to the theme of the Holocaust. Indeed, the collection of video interviews has now become a common means of recording, preserving, and transmitting the memory of (often traumatic) events from our recent past.¹³

Besides the impressive effort of collecting and archiving these video testimonies, such initiatives must also ensure their visibility. Some are available online,¹⁴ used in documentaries or TV programmes, or in the educational programmes of schools and museums.

In the last case, the sense of the videos on display is mediated through a series of choices. First, the narrator tries to organise his or her experiences into a coherent structure. The account also depends on the interviewer's methods as well as on specifically cinematic parameters, such as framing, photography, sound, montage, and *mise en scène*.¹⁵ For instance, the witness interviews carried out by the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual

History and Education follow a series of rigorous guidelines regarding the articulation of the narrative and even the direction in which the participants are supposed to look.¹⁶ Moreover, the presentation of video testimonies implies that a curator has selected the materials according to the museum's wider agenda and to other, strictly museographic criteria, such as the spatial arrangement and duration of the extracts: audience reception studies show that exhibition visitors tend to pause in front of videos only for a short time, and the materials must be selected accordingly.¹⁷

Another crucial aspect, when presenting video testimonies, is the kind of relationship that they are meant to establish with the visitor. The interviewer (or diegetic listener) tends to conceal his or her presence, remaining off-screen. The focus is on the relationship between the interviewee and the audience, who becomes the recipient of the narrative and of the commitment to remember it, with all the responsibilities implied by this position. The Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust insists on the centrality of the public in the installation *Tree of Testimony*, which gives visitors access to the video testimonies of the USC Shoah Foundation Institute. On a wall, about seventy screens of various sizes compose a kind of tree-like structure inspired from the work of video-artist Nam June Paik and from Ben Rubin's data visualisation sculpture in the hall of The New York Times Building.¹⁸ Each screen shows a different video testimony that the viewer can select on an audio-guide.

The co-presence of multiple voices weaves a complex relationship between witnesses and viewers. Thanks to the headphones, viewers are isolated and can enjoy a direct, almost intimate relationship with the witness. However, the proliferation of screens on the wall prevents one from isolating a single face: this strategy contributes to giving a sense of the extent of the tragedy and of the dramatically high number of people involved, while also implicitly hinting at all those who were unable to bear witness.¹⁹

Paul Ricœur defines the witness as a subject whose authority is ensured by its first-hand experience of the events that he or she is publicly relating.²⁰ Bearing witness is therefore a performative speech act that both asserts the reality of the narrated event and identifies a recipient.²¹ According to Ricœur, the receiver 'gets inscribed in an exchange that sets up a dialogical situation. It is before someone that the witness testifies to the reality of the scene of which he [*sic*] was part of the audience, perhaps as actor or victim.'²² Thus, the witness 'asks to be believed. He does not limit himself to say "I was there", he adds "believe me"'.²³ The aim is to establish a contract of trust that regulates the interaction between the witness and the audience. Moreover, the *Tree of Testimony*'s many screens seem to enable a mosaic of narratives that implicitly validate one another. The subjectivity of every witness is inscribed in a wider

community united by a shared experiential horizon: subjective memory may be patchy and inaccurate, but the emphasis is on a collective narrative that transcends it.

However, there is a downside to this strategy. Alice Cati notes that personal memories preserved in the USC Shoah Foundation are all ‘merged into the same story, the same macro-narrative through which the group that founded the project legitimizes itself’.²⁴ When audio-visual devices become the mediators of cultural memory²⁵ and determine the creation of a canon, the risk pointed out by Cati is that memories become homologated.²⁶ This mechanism is particularly evident in the installation at the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust: the emphasis on the unique character of each individual story is counterbalanced by the invitation, inherent in the very format of the installation, to consider them in their totality.

The visitor can play a crucial role in this dialectic. The contract of trust highlighted by Paul Ricoeur implies the acceptance of reciprocity. In *Tree of Testimony*, the task of selecting the testimony to which they will listen appeals to the visitors’ sense of responsibility and forces them to acknowledge their role of recipients. Their choices may be guided by keywords, by the empathy they may feel towards some of the faces, or by chance. On the one hand, the range of possibilities creates a more conscious involvement with the images and the testimony, and highlights the role of the recipient; on the other, the whole operation risks being reduced to something akin to channel surfing. Moreover, it raises the problem of managing the often exorbitant amount of (video) testimonies that saturate contemporary culture and introduces the need of creating meaningful ways to explore them.

NOTES

1. On how the digitization of heritage objects alter our relationship with the past, see Treleani, *Qu’est-ce que le patrimoine numérique?*
2. Pickford, ‘Making the Churchill Museum’, <http://www.cassonmann.co.uk/publications/making-the-churchill-museum>, last visit 7 march 2015.
3. See Chapter 9.
4. As stated by Christian Puren, curator of the Historial, in a promotional text about Panasonic projectors used in the exhibition, ‘Musée des invalides. Projecteurs sur l’Histoire’ (our translation).
5. Fontanille, *Soma et Séma*.
6. Ibid.
7. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 19.
8. As it would be impossible to mention the entire literature on documentary cinema, see at least Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*; Chapman, *Issues in Contemporary Documentary*; Balsom and Peleg (eds), *Documentary Across Disciplines*.

9. On museum theatre, see Bridal, *Exploring Museum Theatre*; Hughes, *Museum Theatre*.
10. See Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*; Wonders, *Habitat Dioramas*.
11. Wonders, *Habitat Dioramas*, p. 222.
12. On these archives, see Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*; Shandler, *Holocaust Memory in the Digital Age*.
13. See Sarkar and Walker (eds), *Documentary Testimonies*.
14. Available at <<http://web.library.yale.edu/testimonies/singlewitness>>; <<https://sfi.usc.edu/watch>> (last accessed 30 September 2018).
15. See Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony*; Stier, *Committed to Memory*.
16. See Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony*.
17. See de Jong, 'Mediatized Memory'.
18. Lewis, 'L.A. Museum of the Holocaust's Tree of Testimony'.
19. Ibid.
20. Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*.
21. See Guerin and Hallas, 'Introduction', p. 10. On 'speech acts' see Searle, *Speech Acts*.
22. Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 164.
23. Ibid.
24. Cati, *Immagini della memoria*, p. 251 (our translation).
25. On the notions of cultural memory and communicative memory, see Assman, 'Communicative and Cultural Memory'.
26. Cati, *Immagini della memoria*, pp. 251–5.